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ASOCIACIÓN NACIONAL
DE
MÉDICOS FORENSES

Spanish Journal of Legal Medicine

Revista Española de Medicina Legal

www.elsevier.es/mlegal



SPECIAL ARTICLE

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on gender-based violence homicides in Spain[☆]



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Received 5 April 2021; accepted 10 August 2021

Available online 1 December 2021

KEYWORDS

Gender-based
violence;
Covid-19;
Pandemic;
Lockdown;
Homicides;
Risk of lethality

Abstract Circumstances under COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have reduced the number of gender-based violence homicides in 2020, with a total number of 45, the lowest in the historical statistics. Analysis of these circumstances generated by the lockdown and mobility reduction, together the economical negative impact, has produced an increment of 49,6% in the number of calls to 016 (telephone for victims' assistance), and a reduction of 14,6% in the complaints of violence during the months of lockdown. This situation reflects a higher control of victims and more difficulties to exit from violence, that has decreased the number of homicides to 4 during these months, the lowest within Spanish statistics. These circumstances are compatible with an increment of risk of aggressions and lethality, factor that can be related with the increment of homicides limited to August, when the mobility and socio-labor opportunities were recovered. The study of the social circumstances originated by the pandemic allows to describe three different patterns in the impact on gender-based violence.

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DOI of original article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.reml.2021.08.001>

[☆] Please cite this article as: Lorente-Acosta M, Lorente-Martínez M, Lorente-Martínez M. Impacto de la pandemia por COVID-19 y el confinamiento en los homicidios por violencia de género en España. Rev Esp Med Legal. 2022;48:36–43.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Violencia de género;
Covid-19;
Pandemia;
Confinamiento;
Homicidios;
Riesgo de letalidad

Impacto de la pandemia por COVID-19 y el confinamiento en los homicidios por violencia de género en España

Resumen La situación creada por la pandemia por COVID-19 y el confinamiento han dado lugar a una disminución del número de homicidios por violencia de género en 2020 con 45 homicidios, el número más bajo de toda la serie histórica. El análisis de las circunstancias generadas por el confinamiento y la limitación de la movilidad en las fases posteriores, unidas al deterioro de la situación económica, son factores relacionados con el aumento de la violencia durante el segundo trimestre (meses del confinamiento), expresado en un incremento del 49,6% en el número de llamadas al 016, y en una disminución de las denuncias del 14,6% en esos mismos meses. Esta situación refleja el aumento del control y la disminución de oportunidades para salir de la violencia, que ha incidido en la disminución del número de homicidios, con 4 homicidios durante los meses de confinamiento, un número que nunca había sido tan bajo para un trimestre. La situación surgida es compatible con un incremento del riesgo de letalidad, factor que puede estar relacionado con el aumento de homicidios limitado al mes de agosto, coincidiendo con la recuperación de las circunstancias de movilidad y oportunidades socio-laborales. El estudio de las circunstancias sociales ocasionadas por la pandemia a lo largo de 2020 permite describir tres patrones de impacto sobre la violencia de género.

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Introduction

In a previous article on *gender violence and the pandemic*¹ we analysed the characteristics of this type of violence and how the lockdown and restrictions on movement helped aggressors in their primary aim of controlling women and subjecting them to their demands and conditions^{2,3}. There are 4 fundamental consequences: isolation of women, increased control, facilitation of impunity because it is difficult for women to escape the relationship and report abuse, and an increase in violence in its different forms: physical, psychological and sexual^{4,5}.

This situation is like that described in other scenarios with similar circumstances involving restricted movement, primarily due to major disasters. Persistence of these elements and the length of quarantine periods have been described as risk factors for gender-based violence⁶.

The impact of the pandemic and lockdown on the evolution of and response to gender-based violence

The evidence suggests that gender-based violence has increased under the circumstances created by the pandemic, and that the response to it and support for victims have been hampered in this scenario.

The increase in violence has been reflected in a significant increase in calls to 016. The limited response has resulted in fewer reports filed and less support for women under the circumstances created by the pandemic.

Analysis of the situation shows that calls to 016 increased from March, when the lockdown began, and reached a peak in the second quarter coinciding with the months of full restriction of movement, with a total of 25,352 calls

(Fig. 1)⁷, the highest number in all the historical data. In the first quarter there were 16,950 calls, and in the second quarter calls increased by 49.6% to reach the abovementioned figure. This increase was in calls made by the victims themselves, at 52.6%, and calls from family and relatives, at 43.9%. In the third quarter, after lockdown, calls dropped again to 21,135, and dropped further in the fourth quarter to 15,449.

There was a total of 150,785 reports in 2020, 10.3% less than in 2019, according to CGPJ data⁸. There was a decrease in all quarters of the year, although more markedly in the second, with a decrease of 14.6% compared to the same period in 2019, and of 11.7% in the fourth quarter. The average decrease in the first and third quarters was 7.4%.

In the quarters with the largest drop in the number of reports (the second and fourth quarters), the decrease was mainly in reports filed by family members, the police, and through injury reports. The percentage drop in each of these groups in the second and fourth quarters (peak of the pandemic) is as follows:

- Reports by relatives decreased by an average of 43.7%, while in the other quarters (first and third) the average decrease in this group was 10.7%.
- Reports through police intervention in the second and fourth quarters decreased on average by 26.6%, whereas in the first and third quarters the average increase was .5%.
- Injury reports decreased by an average of 29.6% in the second and fourth quarters, while the average decrease in the other quarters (first and third) was 4.6%.

This scenario reflects the isolation that has significantly limited the reaction to gender-based violence, and the actions of people who might have known about the situation

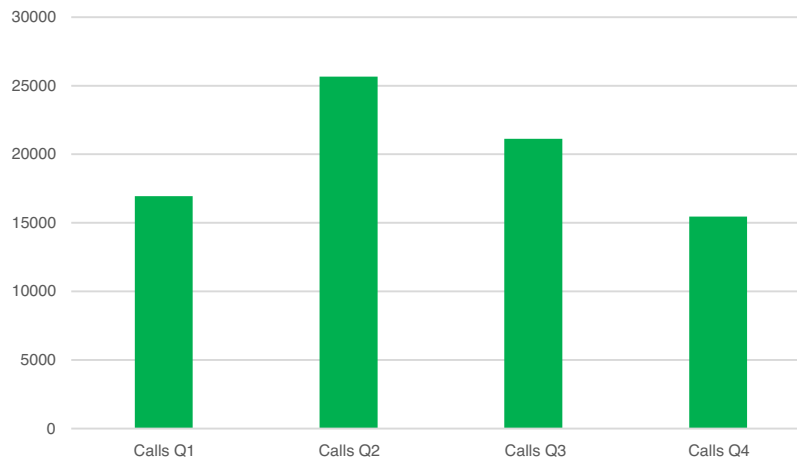


Figure 1 Calls to 016. Quarters 2020.

of violence, either in terms of professional response (State Security Forces and medical professionals), or because they knew about the situation of violence (family members). On the other hand, the fact that much of this violence took place in the home means that reports by third parties, who are usually people in the neighbourhood, only decreased by 3.9% in the second quarter, and increased by 23.1% in the fourth quarter 23.1%.

The situation reflects an increase in gender-based violence that resulted in an increase in calls to 016 accompanied by greater isolation, in terms of restricted movement and difficulties in getting a response and a solution. These circumstances have facilitated increased control and increased risk, which are elements that have impacted homicides.

Impact of the pandemic and lockdown on homicide due to gender-based violence

The impact of the pandemic and lockdown on homicide due to gender-based violence reflects the two-fold situation described above: on the one hand, increased control due to restricted movement and reduced opportunities brought about by the social crisis, a situation that leads to a decrease in serious assaults, and on the other, the accumulated risk that these circumstances entail³.

The net result has been a decrease in the number of women killed through gender-based violence, but no decrease in the violence. Specifically, there was a total of 45 gender-based violence homicides in 2020, the lowest in the entire historical data⁹. Analysis of the evolution over the year reflects the impact of the pandemic on these criminal acts.

The 45 homicides in 2020 represent a decrease of 25.9% compared to the annual average of homicides in the entire historical data (60.8 homicides), and a decrease of 18.2% compared to the 55 homicides in 2019 (Fig. 2).

This result comes in a context in which homicides have been increasing since 2016, when there were 49 homicides, the lowest number in the entire historical data, with a progressive annual increase to 55 in 2019.

The first quarter of 2020 also reflects this increase in gender-based violence and its expression in the form of homicide, with 17 homicides compared to an average of 15.1 in this first quarter, an increase of 12.3%.

However, in the second quarter of 2020, coinciding with the lockdown, the trend changed and there were 4 homicides, while the average number of homicides in that second quarter was 14.6, which is a decrease of 72.6%, a truly exceptional situation to date. Similar data revealing the significant decrease during lockdown, show that there were 15 homicides in the second quarter of 2019, compared to 4 in the same quarter of 2020, a decrease of 73.3% (Fig. 2).

There was a total of 16 homicides in the third quarter of 2020, very similar to the average at .5 points below it. A comparable situation to that of the same period in 2019 when there were 17 homicides, one more than in 2020.

The fourth quarter reflects an evolution equal to that of 2019, with the same number of homicides⁸, clearly below the fourth quarter average of 14.6, which we will analyse in the discussion.

Discussion on the evolution of gender-based violence homicides in the context of the pandemic

The 25.9% decrease in homicides in 2020 (45), compared to the average from 2003 to 2011 (60.8), in a context of 3 years of a continuous increase in gender-based violence maintained in the first quarter of 2020, and with an exceptional 72.6% decrease in the number of homicides in the second quarter coinciding with the months of lockdown, reflects the direct relationship that the pandemic and total restriction of movement have had on this result.

This situation is consistent with our previous paper¹, in relation to several factors:

- 1 Increased control and isolation of women victims of gender-based violence together with the increase in violence.
- 2 Fewer opportunities to escape from violence through separation and reporting.

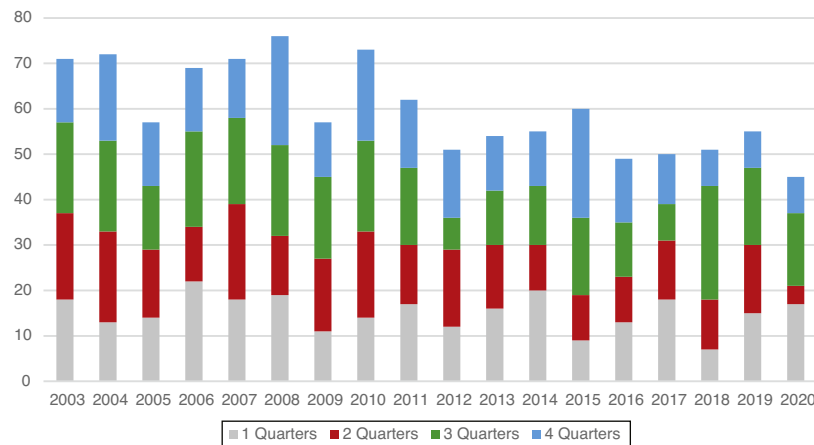


Figure 2 Homicides due to gender-based violence 2003–2020. Distribution by quarter.

- 3 Reduced possibility of professional support and assistance.
- 4 Perception of impunity on the part of aggressors.

This isolation coinciding with a situation of greater violence is reflected in the 49.6% increase in the number of calls to 016, together with the 14.6% decrease in the number of reports in the second quarter, which shows the lower involvement of the family and professional response, both in police intervention (the number of police reports fell by 20.7%), and in medical and health response, with a decrease of 18.8% in the number of injury reports issued due to gender-based violence.

The evolution of the third and fourth quarters also reflects the impact of the pandemic. The monthly evolution in the number of homicides shows that in the third quarter there is a significant increase in the number of homicides primarily in August (Fig. 3) after July, when the number of homicides remained low compared to the historical average for July, which is 6.3 (36.5% lower in July 2020). This is despite being preceded by the months of the second quarter that are characterised by a very low number of homicides: 4 from April to June.

In fact, if we look at the historical data (Table 1) and the evolution of homicides committed from April to July, and compare the homicides in August to those 4 months, the average number of homicides in August is 27.1% compared to the homicides committed from April to May. In 2020 the situation changes significantly, and the 8 homicides in August compared to the homicides from April to July represent an increase of 100%. (Table 2). Despite the statistical limitations in addressing this situation, such a marked increase in homicides limited to August after a period of 4 months with a very low number is unique in the entire historical data 2003–2020.

This increase limited to August 2020 could be related to the following:

- 1 The situation of control and isolation continuing throughout the month of July resulting from the gradual introduction of new circumstances after lockdown, in distinct phases until the lifting of restricted movement, which were formally in place until 21 June. Everything

indicates, however, that they were functionally prolonged in much of society.

- 2 Culmination of the gradual adaptation to normal life in August, coinciding with a holiday period, together with institutional messages referring to beating the pandemic and returning to a ‘new normality’. These messages that made it easier to break away from what lockdown and restricted movement had caused in terms of control and isolation.
- 3 The data reflecting this change in the circumstances of gender-based violence are reflected in an increase of 23.9% in the number of reports during the third quarter compared to the second, and in a 1.7% decrease in female unemployment during July (SEPE, 2021) due to gradual adaptation.

The situation in August is consistent with the decrease in constraints due to the pandemic, and with the increase in risk arising from a perceived loss of control, which may have influenced the violent response to the change in circumstances.

The evolution of homicides during the fourth quarter (8 in 2020), down 25.9% from the historical average (14.6), may be related to the start of the second wave of the pandemic and the impact it had on the economy, which again made opportunities to escape more difficult and increased aggressors’ control over women victims of gender-based violence. The fact that this number of homicides is like that of 2019 in the same period does not lessen the influence of the pandemic on these homicides, since the elements that reflect the impact of the social situation on the number of homicides are different in the two years. And while in the fourth quarter of 2020 there is a pattern similar to that of other quarters under the pandemic, with a decrease in the number of calls to 016 compared to the third quarter, and also a decrease in the number of reports filed compared to the previous quarter, in 2019 the decrease in homicides in the fourth quarter was accompanied by an increase in the number of reports filed, which shows a different response to the violence that took place that year.

Analysis of the evolution of gender-based violence together with the evolution of domestic violence, as well as analysis of the evolution of gender-based violence homi-

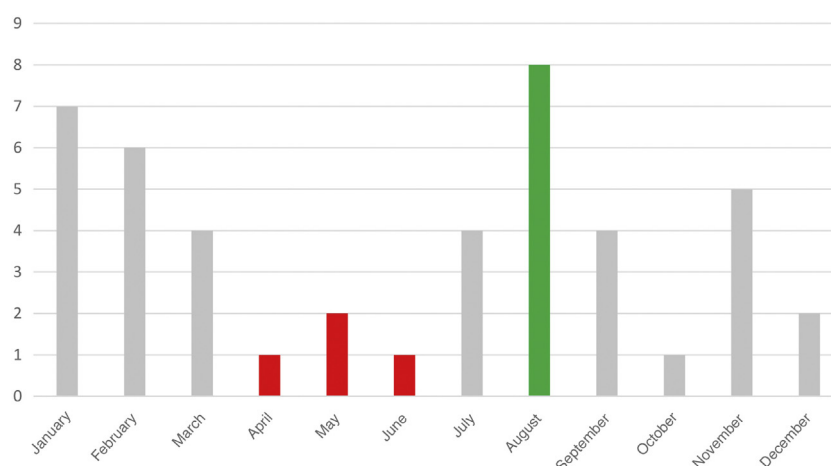


Figure 3 Homicides due to gender-based violence. 2020.

cides during 2020, shows a different pattern in gender-based violence indicating that the circumstances of this violence are different from other interpersonal violence, which has also been affected by the pandemic and lockdown, but in a different way.

The report of the National Institute of Statistics (INE) “*Statistics on Domestic Violence and Gender Violence Year 2020*”, published on 11/5/21¹⁰, shows how domestic violence reports increased by 8.2% during 2020, while those of gender-based violence decreased by 8.4% in the same period under the pandemic. This reveals the different nature of these types of violence and how the same social circumstances have affected them differently, since in 2019, without the effect of the pandemic, both types of violence increased in a comparable way; domestic violence by 3.6% and gender-based violence by 2.0%¹¹.

Meanwhile, data from the Crime Statistics System (SEC) of the Ministry of the Interior¹² show that general homicides decreased in 2020, as did homicides due to gender-based violence. However, this general data cannot be used to conclude any similarity between the 2 types of violence (interpersonal violence in general versus gender-based violence), but must be related with common circumstances used to inflict both types of violence based on their motivations and objectives.

If we compare the SEC data on general homicides and gender-based violence homicides we find that while general homicides decreased by 7.9%, GBV homicides decreased by 18.2%, which already indicates a significant difference in the incidence of both types of homicide. However, if we compare the evolution by quarters, we observe that the differences are more significant.

In the first quarter, general homicides in 2020 rose by 13.3% and GBV homicides by 13.3% compared to the same quarter of 2019. In the second quarter, coinciding with lockdown, general homicides fell by only 1.2% while GBV homicides fell by 73.3%. In the third quarter, general homicides fell by 14.1% and GBV homicides fell by 5.9%, much less, probably due to the increased risk after restricted movement and the abovementioned increase in August. And in the fourth quarter, overall homicides decreased by 20.3% whereas there was no variation in GBV homicides because,

as we note, the 8 homicides in the fourth quarter of 2019 and 2020 were particularly low compared to the 14.6 average for that quarter in the historical series.

These data show a different evolution in general homicides and GBV homicides, and greater impact of the circumstances of the pandemic and lockdown on GBV homicides, since, although there are common elements between the 2 types of violence and the group of general homicides is more heterogeneous, gender-based violence is inflicted due to different motivations and objectives than other types of violence.

From our analysis of the different circumstances generated by the pandemic, mainly in terms of restricted movement and the difficulty of escaping a violent relationship and receiving support from the different institutions, and how all this has influenced the available indicators that reflect the reaction to gender-based violence experienced in these circumstances (number of calls to 016, number of reports, and evolution of homicides), we have defined 3 patterns in relation to the social situation associated with the pandemic:

1 Lockdown pattern. Defined by:

- Increase in number of calls to 016
- Decrease in the number of crime reports
- Decrease in the number of homicides

This pattern reflects how gender-based violence is inflicted under the close and maintained control of the aggressor, keeping the woman in the very setting of the violence unable to leave and report or receive support, which influences the decrease in the number of homicides. The most feasible option for receiving assistance in this situation is through calls to 016. This pattern is observed in the second quarter of 2020.

2 Pattern of “social normalisation”. Defined by:

- Decrease in calls to 016
- Increase in the number of reports filed
- Increase in the number of homicides

Table 1 Monthly distribution of homicides due to gender-based violence 2003–2020 (DGVG, 2021).

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
January	8	2	6	9	5	7	0	3	8	8	4	7	3	7	5	2	8	7
February	4	5	5	4	9	8	5	4	6	2	4	5	2	4	10	2	3	6
March	6	6	3	9	4	4	6	7	3	2	8	8	4	2	3	3	4	4
April	5	6	5	5	4	5	2	8	3	4	6	5	1	4	4	4	5	1
May	6	8	4	5	7	3	9	6	8	3	6	2	4	4	6	1	3	2
June	8	6	6	2	10	5	5	5	2	10	2	3	5	2	3	6	7	1
July	8	7	4	8	8	5	6	10	7	3	2	3	9	6	2	8	10	4
August	8	6	6	9	7	8	6	2	4	2	2	8	6	4	4	7	3	8
September	4	7	4	4	4	7	6	8	6	2	8	2	2	2	2	10	4	4
October	2	7	5	6	5	7	6	6	6	6	5	2	7	4	5	4	4	1
November	9	4	6	2	7	6	1	7	3	6	5	5	7	5	3	2	3	3
December	3	8	3	6	1	11	5	7	6	3	2	5	10	5	3	2	1	4

DGVG: Government delegation for Gender Violence.

Source: Government delegation for Gender Violence, 2021.

Table 2 Evolution of homicides during peak months of the first wave of the pandemic (April–July 2020) and the situation in August (DGVG, 2021).

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
April	5	6	5	5	4	5	2	8	3	4	6	5	1	4	4	4	5	1
May	6	8	4	5	7	3	9	6	8	3	6	2	4	4	6	1	3	2
June	8	6	6	2	10	5	5	5	2	10	2	3	5	2	3	6	7	1
July	8	7	4	8	8	5	6	10	7	3	2	3	9	6	2	8	10	4
August	8	6	6	9	7	8	6	2	4	2	2	8	6	4	4	7	3	8
Percentage increase ^a	20.6	22.2	31.6	45.0	24.1	44.4	27.3	6.9	21.1	12.5	10.0	61.5	31.6	25.0	26.7	36.8	12.0	100.0

DGVG: Government delegation for Gender Violence.

Source: Government delegation for Gender Violence, 2021.

^a Increase in August compared to the months of April–July.

For victims, the return to “normality” and movement is accompanied by opportunities (real and perceived) to escape the violence, and find direct support in the institutions, which they do not need to use 016 alone to find. However, this also translates into an increase in the number of homicides due to the aggressors’ perception of loss of control. The third quarter of 2020 reflects this pattern.

3 Pattern of restricted movement and social crisis. Defined by:

- Decrease in number of calls to 016
- Decrease in the number of reports filed
- Decrease in the number of homicides

The restriction of movement is not as intense as during lockdown, but the new waves of the pandemic have an impact on society in terms of restricted movement and the consequent difficulty in filing a report, and in greater control by aggressors, which translates into a decrease in homicides. This pattern appears in the fourth quarter of 2020 with the second wave.

It is striking how in the first quarter of 2021, with the peak of the third wave after Christmas and the serious social impact it had, gender-based violence followed a “pattern of lockdown”, although there was no formal lockdown. The data available for the second quarter of 2021 indicate that this is a “pattern of normalisation”, with a consequent increase in the number of homicides.

Conclusions

The data indicate that the pandemic and lockdown directly impacted the number of gender-based violence homicides, and that this was different from domestic violence and other forms of interpersonal violence. The impact was twofold, but not as a single factor. On the one hand, there was an impact on the overall decrease in the number of homicides, and on the other, on the concentration of homicides in the month coinciding with the change in social references created by lockdown. The factors that influenced this result are:

Increased control over women and limited opportunities to escape violence through separation and reporting.

Decreased possibilities of receiving direct professional support, in health and police intervention.

We have defined 3 patterns from the elements studied regarding the impact of the pandemic on gender-based violence according to the possibilities of reaction based on the social situation. The first is the “pattern of lockdown”, the second the “pattern of normalisation”, and the third the “pattern of restriction of movement and social crisis”.

The evolution of violence during the first months of 2021 reflects the relationship between the social circumstances generated by the pandemic, gender-based violence and the type of response to it, and how social impact is more of a determinant than the formal measures adopted at the institutional level.

Limitations

The multiple factors that influence gender-based violence, the low frequency of homicides in statistical terms and their dispersion over time, together with the structural nature of their causes, are elements that make it difficult to address the circumstances quantitatively. Brofenbrenner’s ecological model used by the WHO¹³ shows how the cultural component influences the social component, this in the different contexts related to gender violence, and how within each context people respond in a particular way as part of the individual elements. However, despite the individual characteristics in the form and circumstances of violence and homicides, we must consider the common factors that influence violence from the different components (contextual, social, and cultural), despite the limitations of quantitative analysis, as this is the only way to learn novel approaches that can be taken in diverse ways as the data increases.

This paper has the limitations inherent to gender-based violence, together with the very special circumstances generated by the pandemic, and how it varies over time according to the social situation and measures adopted, which have changed as its incidence has evolved. These limitations should be taken as a challenge contribute towards further studies, either to confirm them or to modify them according to new results.

The grave consequences of gender-based violence and the fact that even today 75% of cases are still not reported or communicated to the care institutions, mean that we must study and assess the evidence to improve our understanding of the factors and elements that impact it. This was the objective of this study.

Funding

We received no funding for this or the previous paper.

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